The Etymology of Medicine

By Thelma Charen

Subject Header, Current List of Medical Literature
Army Medical Library
Washington, D. C.

THE intention of this article is to reflect upon the origin of the word *medicine*, to find the ultimate etymological source from which the rivers of this all-reaching science have sprung. In so doing, it may be possible to study the semantic processes by which the complexity of medicine as we know it today has evolved from the temple medicine of the Greeks. The plan is to trace the word *medicine* back through its linguistic and grammatical transformations to its primary root.

The words *medicine* and *medical* appear frequently. We have no difficulty in recognizing the variant forms which appear in a medical library: *medicina*, *médecine*, *Medizin*, *meditsina*, and *medycyna*. The linguistic relationship is so patent that it can stop there. Although a cursory examination of a score of books on medical terminology in numerous languages discloses definitions, explanations, and exegeses of extensive scientific vocabularies, it reveals no comprehensive analysis of the word *medicine*.

Just as we recognize the familial relationship of the words for medicine in the various languages, so we have no difficulty in recognizing the grammatical derivatives from the *medicine* we see daily; even the rare, obsolete, or obsolescent forms show the mother word: medicamentally, medicamentary, medicamentation, medicamentous, mediciner, medicining, medify, medicinable, medicinary, medicaster, medicator, and medicatory (1). A medieval Latin word-list (2) gives two further forms which did not enter English: *medicatura* (medical treatment) and *medicinatio* (medicine, drug, or cure); these might have appeared as medicature and medication.

From *medicine*, from the Latin *medicina*, meaning the profession as we know it, it is but one etymological step backward to *medicus*, the physician. Any dictionary, English or foreign, takes us there. The most complete coverage regarding the derivation seems to be that of Henry Alan Skinner in *The Origin of Medical Terms*. He states that it is from the Latin:

> Medicina, the art of healing, or the means of healing, from medicinus, relating to healing, from medeor or medicor, to heal or cure. Medicina is thus a substantive noun from the adjective medicinus; as also medicus the adjective which meant healing or wholesome used as a substantive meant doctor or physician. At first medicus was a general term applied to anyone associated with the healing art and the care or treatment of patients. The Greek equivalent

of medicus was ἰατήρ. Medicus may have some relation to the early Oscan term "meddix," a kind of public official. (3)

The verb form *medeor* is the ultimate origin given us in Dr. Skinner's derivation and in other similar sources. The verb *medeor* itself, however, has a remote ancestry, the ancient Indo-European root MA and MAD and its more familiar hypothetical form MED, meaning to think or to reflect, to give consideration or care to (4). Ernout and Meillet state that the root MED in this sense "is found from one end of the Indo-European kingdom to the other"(5).

In Latin MED appears, in addition to *medeor* above, in the frequentative* form *meditor*, meditate, and all its derivatives. These retain the first meaning of the root, that is, thought in general or meditation. In Greek the word μέδομαι (short e) means to give attention to or to think about. The idea of thought inherent in the MED root leads to the verb μήδομαι (long e) which incorporates a more deliberate sense of counsel or advice, and to the noun μῆδος (plural μήδεα) meaning plans or counsels and subsequently schemes. This last meaning is seen in the Medea of Greek tragedy, Medea the Sorceress, the Schemer, the Cunning. The same root, less evil in intent, appears in Archimedes, Diomedes, Ganymede, Laomedon—names familiar to us from Greek history and mythology. In other languages too there is direct evidence of this extended meaning of thought following MED: the Armenian *mit* (reflection) and the Icelandic *mât* (appraisal).

From the concept of general thought there follows naturally deliberate thought, judgment, or decision, the weighing of fact (and object) or measuring. There is evidence of this element of judgment in the Irish forms *midiur* (I judge) and *ro mîdar* (I have judged). The Greek μέδομαι given above implied judgment; the official weight of this judgment takes the form of domination in μέδων or μέδουσα, a ruler. This form also appears in the mythological Medusa known to us through the Perseus legend. The Irish retains this meaning in *con-midathar*, he rules or has the power to.

At this point we can amplify the reference to the early *meddix* given in Dr. Skinner's quotation. *Meddix* appears in Latin dictionaries as coming from *medeor* and means "he who gives thought to," comparable to the Homeric μέδων or μέδουσα, given above as one who rules. Among the Oscans, a people of ancient Italy, it was a magistrate, a MED-dic-s, one who points out the law. The *meddix tuticus* of early inscriptions was the highest Oscan magistrate, as reported by classical and post-classical writers. Dr. Edmund Andrews in *A History of Scientific English* also reports the ancient inscription, translating the word as "a tribune of the people, that is, one to protect them from the rapacity of nobles"(6). I think, however, that his interpretation is less closely

* Frequentative in grammar is a form which expresses frequent repetition; e.g., *quaero*, seek; *quaerito*, ask persistently. Likewise, *medeor*, think; *meditor*, keep thinking and so meditate.

allied to the idea of protection in MED in its extended meaning than it is to the idea of the intellectual judgment of the early root meaning of think or reflect, the major duty of a magistrate in legal judgment. Moreover, this technical sense of giving judgment in an official and legal capacity appears not in Latin, report Ernout and Meillet, but in the other early Italian dialects. This, therefore, seems to substantiate the earlier and primary meaning of MED in *meddix* as one who gives judgment rather than the later meaning of caring for or protecting the people.

Up to this point the original MED root has progressed from thought in general to specific judgment. Now from reflecting and judging come also measuring and weighing physically. This advanced meaning appears in the Gothic *mitan* and the Old High German *māz*, both meaning measure; in the Irish *med*, balance; in the Greek μέδιμνος, a dry corn-measure; in the Latin *medius*, a peck. It appears in English in all the derivatives from the Latin *modus*, measure, quantity, or extent, from which we in turn get modest, commodious, accommodate, mode, modern, moderate; in all of these we can detect a concept of measuring, making fit and proportionate.

The transition from the original simple thinking and the later considered judgment would entail doing something active about it, in other words, to care for. Here we are now approaching the more specific and eventually the completely technical sense of medicine as care and attention to a specialized group, the sick. It is precisely the same process which enabled the Latin word *curo* (to care for) to become care for the sick and ultimately the *cur*ing of them and likewise the simple Greek θεραπεύω (to wait on) to become the *therapy* of the sick.

By the classical period of Latin *medeor* is well established in its third level of developed thought: giving attention to the sick, thence to healing. An archaic form, *medela*,* remedy, was replaced in the classical period by the very word *remedium* and the derivatives we know. A very early inscription suggests *Meditrina*, a goddess of healing, in the October festival dedicated to her, the *Meditrinalia* (7).

We are now approaching MED in its last phase. *Medicus* is the adjective form of the manifestation we know most commonly and its verb form is *medico* or *medicor*. The adjective *medicinus*, pertaining to medical, was used as an adjective in pre-classical and post-classical Latin and as a noun its use is classical. In the feminine gender *medicina* is used in three substantive forms. When used with the word *ars* (art or skill) it signified the profession as we know it, medicine and sometimes surgery; with *officina* (shop) it signified the "office" of the practitioner or the shop where his remedies were purchased; with *res* (thing or object) it signified the medicine or prescription itself (8).

* The *Medieval Latin Word-List* cited above gives on p. 261 from a manuscript of c.731 A.D. *medeliferus*, healing, from *medela*, remedy and *fero*, bring, produce.

It is interesting to note that when it appeared in medieval literature it had not only the meaning of a legal remedy but also of an elixir able to turn lead into gold and copper into silver (9).

Although the Romans made little distinction between the trades and professions, between artisan and artist in our sense of the words, still they consciously devised a hierarchy of professions, as it were, placing on the highest level those who pursued the *artes liberales*, among them the physician, sculptor, architect, teacher, and chemist.

In poetry and post-Augustan prose the participle *medens* from *medeor* was used as the substantive for physician. The usual word, however, was *medicus** pertaining to healing. I have found in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* epigraphical evidence of inscriptions, for the most part from Rome, containing not only *medicus* (10) but in addition *medicus chirurgus* (11) (surgeon), *medicus ocularius* (12) (eye doctor), *medicus auricularius* (13) (ear doctor), *medicus veterinarius* (14) (veterinarian), *medicus equarius* (15) (horse doctor), *mulomedicus* (16) (mule doctor), *medicus ludi* (17) (doctor at the games or our athletic physician), *scriba medicorum* (18) (possibly a writer of prescriptions) and also *medica* (19) (woman physician). Further, Orelli cites inscriptions bearing the words *medicus alarum* (20) and *medicus legionis* (21) (our army doctors), *medicus triremis* (22) (ship doctor), *medicus iumentarius* (23) (cattle doctor), *medicus clinicus* (24) (a physician who attends patients in bed, from κλίνη, bed) and *schola medicorum* (25) (medical school). Both the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (26) and Orelli (27) give *medicus a bybliothecis*. Although *a bybliothecis* (*bibliothecis*) was the Latin for librarian, the full significance with *medicus* is not entirely clear.

Dr. Edmund Andrews states that *medicus* "simply means an intermediary probably between God and man" (28) and later that *medicus* "implied mediation, probably as suggested earlier, between God and man in a priestly capacity" (29). He offers *meddix* as testimony of this, but it appears to be unsubstantiated in the face of the history of MED derivatives presented in this paper. Dr. Andrews, a keen student of the history of medicine as well as of the evolution of biomedical terminology, knows well and proves ably the development of early medicine in early religion. His physician as the temple mediator between the sick and God is historically acceptable. Moreover, he gives substantial linguistic proof which archaeology and history confirm. His implication, however, as I read it, is that MEDicus is the MEDiator, from MEDius, meaning

* It is interesting to note that the word appears in the name of the famous 14th, 15th, and 16th century Florentine family, De Medici. I am unable to quote the source or to verify the statement that the balls or roundels on their coat of arms are pills in commemoration of their medical origin, in addition to those balls which represent their banking background. G. F. Young in *The Medici* (New York, Dutton, 1913, Vol. 1, p. 20) denies that the family was originally physicians or apothecaries and states that the origin of the balls is unknown.

middle, from an entirely different root. I have found nothing in the dictionaries and etymological sources to support his views.

In our analysis of the word *medicus* from the word *medeor* we have passed through all the stages of crystallization from thinking in general through considered reflection to actively giving care to the sick. Having accepted the universal definition of medicine as the science dealing with the prevention, cure, or alleviation of disease, we can in turn accept the ancient Indo-European root MED as clearly extending to the diagnostic appraisal and clinical evaluation which are the hallmarks of medicine. After meditating on and deliberately weighing the illness, the *medicus*, the agent who also judges, counsels, and attends the patient and his ills, can well be the physician. The clinics and laboratories, the therapies and prescriptions of modern medical practice have long since crept into the original concept of consideration and counsel. Still daily, current medical literature proffers evidence of an inevitable return to the root meaning of *medicine*. In the words of a modern physician,

> The value of the physician is derived far more from what may be called his general qualities than from his special knowledge. A sound knowledge of the aetiology, pathology, and natural history of the commoner diseases is a necessary attribute of any competent clinician. But such qualities as good judgement, the ability to see the patient as a whole, the ability to see all aspects of a problem in the right perspective, and the ability to weigh up evidence are far more important than the detailed knowledge of some rare syndrome, or even the possession of an excellent memory and a profound desire for learning. (30)

REFERENCES

1. Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1933. Vol. 6, p. 293–6.
2. BAXTER, J. H. AND JOHNSON, CHARLES: Medieval Latin Word-List from British and Irish Sources. London, Oxford University Press, 1934, p. 262.
3. SKINNER, HENRY ALAN: The Origin of Medical Terms. Baltimore, Williams & Wilkins, 1949, p. 228.
4. LEWIS, CHARLTON T.: An Elementary Latin Dictionary. N. Y., American Book Co., 1918, p. 944.
5. ERNOUT, A. AND MEILLET, A.: Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine; histoire des mots. Nouv. éd. Paris, Klincksieck, 1939, p. 599.
6. ANDREWS, EDMUND: A History of Scientific English. N. Y., Richard R. Smith, 1947, p. 147.
7. ORELLI, JOHANN CASPAR: Inscriptionum latinarum selectarum amplissima collectio. Zurich, Orelli, Fuessli, 1828, Vol. 2, p. 400.
8. ANDREWS, E. A.: Harper's Latin Dictionary; rev. by C. T. Lewis and C. Short. N. Y., American Book Co., 1907, p. 1123.
9. BAXTER, J. H. AND JOHNSON, CHARLES: *loc. cit.*
10. Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum. Berlin, Reimer, 1876–1895, Vol. 6, Pt. 2, p. 1255–1258, Inscription no. 9567–9603.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 902, no. 4350.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 1183, no. 8909.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 1182, no. 8908.
14. *Ibid.*, Vol. 10, Pt. 1, p. 561, no. 5719.

15. *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, Pt. 2, p. 1259, no. 9610.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 1259, no. 9611–9613.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 1336, no. 10172.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 1255, no. 9566.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 1259, no. 9614–9617.
20. Orelli, J. C.: *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 114, no. 3507.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 114, no. 3508.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 136, no. 3640.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 257, no. 4229.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 114, no. 3506.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 256, no. 4226.
26. Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, Vol. 6, Pt. 2, p. 1182, no. 8907.
27. Orelli, J. C.: *op. cit.* Vol. 1, p. 506, no. 2929.
28. Andrews, Edmund: *op. cit.*, p. 109.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
30. Todd, John W.: Specialisation. Lancet 1: 462–467, Feb. 24, 1951.